

Minimum Educational Qualifications for Basic Education Certificate

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In view of the nation's educational reform programme launched over a decade ago, the first nine years of schooling, which is free and universal for all children aged normally between 6 and 15 years, is described as *basic education*. At the beginning of the reform, the term basic education was defined as "the minimum formal education to which every Ghanaian child is entitled as of right, to equip him/her to function effectively in the society"(GMOE, 1986).

Basic education connotes the attainment of certain minimum levels of educational goals – the mastery of some basic skills and knowledge. The notion of basic education is being pursued not only in Ghana but also in many parts of the world (Akplu, 1999).

The emphasis on junior secondary education in the early part of the reform was to ensure every child obtains good basic education, that is, the acquisition of some basic skills and knowledge. As indicated by its aims, the reform was to make every child:

- numerate and literate
- acquire scientific, basic pre-technical and pre-vocational knowledge and skills
- develop sound moral attitudes and a healthy appreciation of his/her cultural heritage and identity;
- value good citizenship and see it as a basis for effective participation in national development (GMOEC, 1988)

In Ghana, the subjects taken by students at the junior secondary level are the culmination of basic education. The

knowledge, skills and attitudes conveyed by these subjects include what we believe all students must experience in basic education to attain the *minimum levels of educational goals expected of each individual as a right*. This suggests the *minimum pass levels required in all the compulsory subjects* should define the criteria for basic education. Minimum educational requirements become synonymous with basic education. However, in the basic education curriculum for Ghana, these minimum educational requirements are yet to be clearly defined.

In the United States, for instance, many states have passed laws on '*minimum competency testing*' for elementary and secondary school students (Dembo, 1994; Kaplan, 1990). Some States test only the three R's – reading, writing and arithmetic. Others go beyond the three R's to incorporate some psychosocial skills – a combination of basic academic skills with 'survival skills' such as consumer knowledge, oral communication, and governmental processes.

In Ghana, basic education may be terminal or continuing. This implies after junior secondary school, the graduates with minimum (or basic) educational qualifications may enter into apprenticeship to prepare for employment for life, and those with further educational qualifications may continue schooling by entering senior secondary schools or other second cycle institutions. Basic education concept therefore embodies a philosophy that has implications for assessment, grading and certification of junior secondary school graduates.

The BECE is a *school leaving examination* and not necessarily a selection examination. Commenting on the validity of the BECE in a recent publication of the Daily Graphic in an article captioned '*The Examinations that Failed*', Asante (1996) pointed out that

When many students fail an examination, we may blame the students, the teachers or both. We seldom question the examination which failed the students. We take the validity of the examination for granted. But our JSS and SSS examination results suggest that the examinations have on the whole failed us. The examinations have largely failed us because their aims are blurred and objectives multi-purpose.

Our curriculum goals for basic education are not clearly defined. This problem must be confronted. Access, quality and management efficiency are the overall system goals and there is the need to take a critical look at what should really constitute 'basic education' for now and the future. In other words, there is the need to define what should **constitute**

- the *minimum (or basic) educational qualifications* required at the end of junior secondary school by all; and
- the *further educational qualifications* that are necessary at the end of junior secondary school for those who will be pursuing the various forms of senior secondary education.

Even though grading for the basic education certificate uses both the WAEC's BECE and teachers' continuous assessment summaries, it is not based on any of the above principle.

The procedure used currently in processing BECE results suggest the Basic Education Certificate grading scheme is norm-referenced. That is, it allows students to be compared in order to establish a hierarchy of excellence that is used in grading, certification and selection. The current assessment scheme requires students to possess a certain set of knowledge and skills before they can pass. Those who cannot demonstrate their possession of these are failed. The level required to pass is however high, and among those who fail are in fact many who possess a substantial set of attainments which go unrecorded because the *minimum educational qualifications* required at the end of basic education is not clearly defined.

The type of assessment scheme required by the comprehensive junior secondary education system we have in this country today is one which will ensure that all students do reasonably well or do not feel

failures. It is one that can encourage *positive achievement*. Positive achievement refers to the actual attainments of the student in a subject. The assessment scheme should enable students to demonstrate what they know, understand and can do rather than what they do not know.

If an assessment scheme is to provide its users (students, teachers, parents, employers, further and higher education) with accurate information on the standards which students have attained then the scheme should provide students with the opportunities to demonstrate their actual achievement. To do these, the scheme must ensure that the examinations given match the level of the students' attainments. This can only be done where the *minimum educational qualification* required at the end of basic education is clearly defined.

An assessment scheme that is intended to test for minimum competency cannot at the same time do a good job in selecting students for higher academic pursuits. An assessment scheme for testing for minimum competency should utilise criterion-referenced test. The BECE assessment scheme therefore has a problem, as it is the same instrument that is used both for 'testing minimum competency' as well as 'ranking students for selection' into senior secondary.

In view of the above inconsistencies in the BECE assessment scheme, a committee was set up by the Ghana Education Service, and inaugurated on September 10, 1999 by the Director General, to examine the BECE grading system and make recommendations for its improvement, if found necessary. There is therefore a need for all educators to collaborate with the BECE Grading System Committee in order to come out with the minimum educational qualifications required at the end of basic education in the various curriculum areas.

[The writer is in the 6-member BECE Grading System Committee]

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